

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## INTRODUCTION

Systematic Theology: a tidy faith.

The Bible is the textbook for Systematic Theology.

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## THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

### INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of revelation tells us that we can only know anything about God because he has made himself known – Matt 16:17; Lk 10:21f.

- 1) God is transcendent and we are finite – Job 11:7; 38:17.
- 2) Sin has blinded the human mind – Ps 119:18.

The Hebrew word most often translated ‘reveal’ is first so translated in Deut 29:29.

Revelation takes place when God speaks by his Spirit – Isa 40:5; cf. 1 Cor 2:10.

We access the voice of the Spirit in the written Word of God – Eph 3:5; 1 Pet 1:10-12; 1 Sam 3:1,21.

The doctrine of revelation is therefore focussed as the doctrine of Scripture – Isa 8:20.

The purpose of revelation is that we might know the Lord – 1 Sam 3:7; cf. Ps 98:2; Isa 56:1.

Jesus is the ultimate focus of God’s self-revelation – Lk 24:27,44f.

### REVELATION IN SCRIPTURE

#### EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

##### Old Testament

###### **PSALM 19:7-11**

###### **1) The six terms used to refer to God’s Word.**

*Law* (v 7) = instruction or direction in the way.

*Testimony* (v 7) = solemn declaration.

*Statutes* (v 8) = properly appointed.

*Commandment* (v 8) = gives orders.

*Fear* (v 9) = source of fear.

*Judgments* (v 9) = governing decision.

The Word of God does not distinguish between the Law and the Word. To see the OT as Law and the NT as Gospel is a false distinction.

All six terms are linked with the covenant name of the LORD – see Ex 6:3-7.

All six terms emphasise the gracious nature of God’s revelation.

*Law* (way) – cf. Jn 14:6.

*Testimony* – see Ex 26:34; 38:21; 2 Kgs 17:15.

*Statutes* – see Ps 103:8.

*Commandments* – see Lev 22:31; Num 15:40.

*Fear* – see Ex 20:20.

*Judgments* – see Gen 18:25; Lev 19:36b-37.

## 2) The qualities of God's revelation

*Perfect* (v 7) – God's Word is complete.

*Sure* (v 7) – God's Word is true forever.

*Right* (v 8) – God's Word is precisely what we need.

*Pure* (v 8) – God's Word has a dazzling splendour.

*Clean* (v 9) – God's Word is not mixed with error.

*True* (v 9) – God's Word is beyond question.

*Enduring forever* (v 9) – God's Word will never become out of date.

*Righteous altogether* (v 9) – God's Word will never be exposed as false.

In all these respects God's Word is like God himself: perfect (Ps 18:30); sure (Deut 7:9); right (Deut 32:4); pure (Ps 18:26); clean (Hab 1:13); true (Ex 34:6); enduring forever (Ps 48:14); righteous altogether (Job 4:17).

## 3) The impact of God's Word on its recipients

*It converts the soul* (v 7) – it is responsible for our spiritual recovery.

*It makes wise the simple* (v 7) – it sets us going in the right direction.

*It rejoices the heart* (v 8) – it rescues us from the misery of sin.

*It enlightens the eyes* (v 8) – it enables us to see.

Its recipients love it (v 10).

They are warned by it (v 11).

They are rewarded in keeping it (v 11).

## New Testament

### 2 TIMOTHY 3:15-17

#### 1) Two words for the Scriptures (nouns)

*Gramma* (v 15): the fact of writtenness – the method by which God's Word reached us.

*Graphé* (v 16): the documentary record – the finished product as a result.

#### 2) Two descriptive terms (adjectives)

*Holy* (v 15) – God's Word must be handled with reverence.

*Inspired by God* (v 16): literally 'breathed out by God' – the Bible is his very speech; this applies to all of it.

#### 3) Two things God's Word does

*It is able* (v 15): it has the power to give clarity of understanding in preparation for salvation in Christ.

*It is profitable* (v 16): it teaches the truth, convicts of sin, straightens out distorted lives, and trains us in godly living, with a view to equipping us to live for God in our own time and place (v 17).

#### 4) A question

The primary reference here is to the OT: has the passage any bearing on the NT?

For Paul's writings see 2 Pet 3:16.

For the NT as a whole see Eph 3:3-5; 2 Pet 3:2.

## **2 PETER 1:19-21**

### **1) The terms used for God's Word**

*The prophetic word* (v 19): spoken in advance and from above.

*Prophecy of Scripture* (v 20f): this phrase identifies where God's Word is to be found.

### **2) God's revelation in Scripture is more certain (v 19)**

It provides firmer ground than voices from heaven (v 18).

### **3) There is something we know as a matter of primary importance (v 20f)**

Scripture did not originate in human ideas. Pervading all its humanness is a divine quality.

### **4) We must therefore heed the Scriptures (v 19)**

This world is the dark place (Eph 6:12). Pending the full revelation when Jesus returns we need the light of Scripture.

## **FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE**

### **1. The Early Christian Creeds**

#### **i) THE NICENE CREED**

*I believe in the Holy Spirit...who spoke by the prophets.*

To read the Scriptures is to hear the voice of Christ as clearly as if we had been there in Galilee when he was teaching on earth.

#### **ii) THE CHALCEDONIAN DEFINITION**

*The prophets from earliest times spoke of him (Christ).*

### **2. The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms**

#### **1) The inspiration of the 66 canonical books**

1. The origin of Scripture was from God.
2. The Scriptures are God's revelation to man (Heb 1:1).
3. God's Word was published and transmitted through men.
4. God's Word was committed to writing for its preservation.
5. The Scriptures are the living voice of God.

#### **2) How do we know that these 66 books are canonical?**

1. The Church's acknowledgement.
2. The evidence within the Scriptures themselves.
3. The witness of the Spirit.

#### **3) The implications of calling these 66 books 'canonical'**

The Bible is our *kanon* (rule).

#### **4) The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture**

Whatever it is necessary for us to know for salvation, faith, worship, and life is found in the Scriptures.

### 5) **The infallibility of Scripture**

The Bible contains no errors of any sort.

### 6) **The translation of the Scriptures is both possible and necessary**

### 7) **The general thrust of the Bible's message**

God's goodwill towards man, expressed in his benevolence towards sinners in Christ.

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

From the earliest centuries the Church accepted the Bible as the infallible Word of God.

**ORIGEN** (AD185-250 approx.) gave four proofs of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures:

1. The worldwide impact of the Bible.
2. The rapid worldwide spread of the gospel despite persecution.
3. The fulfilment of the prophets' predictions.
4. The subjective experience of reading the Scriptures.

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From the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the historic doctrine of Scripture began to be challenged.

**THE FUNDAMENTALS** (1910-15) reaffirmed the inspiration of the divine writings. Two evidences were stressed:

#### **1. The witness of Christ**

William Craven, *The Testimony of Christ to the OT*:

- 1) The Lord never questioned the Jewish canon.
- 2) He never expressed doubt about anything the Scriptures taught.
- 3) He accepted Scriptural narratives as historically accurate.
- 4) He assumed that the Scriptures are from God.
- 5) He treated the Scriptures as God speaking.
- 6) He took it for granted that the Scriptures were authoritative and not merely human.
- 7) He taught the absolute infallibility of Scripture.
- 8) He declared the prophetic fulfilment of Scripture in himself.

#### **2. The structural unity of the Bible**

- which is in itself miraculous.

**JOSH McDOWELL**, writing in 1973, likewise points out the uniqueness of the Bible as regards its continuity:

1. It was written over a 1600 year time-span.
2. It was written over 60 generations.
3. It was written by 40+ authors from every walk of life.
4. It was written in different places.
5. It was written in different circumstances.
6. It was written during different moods.
7. It was written on three continents.
8. It was written in three languages.

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'**NEO-EVANGELICALISM**' and the limited inerrancy theory. The idea is that the Bible is infallible and inerrant in matters concerning salvation, but that its writers were subject to the worldview of their time, and therefore in matters of science and history, may have made some errors.

Harvie Conn, writing in 1973, criticised this weakened view of Scripture:

1. It gives the impression that the Bible is to be interpreted in the light of science and not science in the light of the Bible.
2. It makes an unwise distinction between inspiration and authority.
3. It affirms inspiration while denying inerrancy.

**THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY** was set up in 1978 to respond to this challenge to the historic view of Scripture. Its chairman, James Montgomery Boice, gives 5 evidences for the Bible being the Word of God:

1. The teaching of Christ.
2. The Bible itself: (a) its teaching about itself; (b) its unity; (c) its amazing accuracy.
3. The fulfilment of prophecy.
4. The Bible's preservation.
5. Its power to transform people's lives.

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**The sufficiency of scripture** is under attack today in the form of '**TRAJECTORY HERMENEUTICS**'.

William Webb argues for the  $X \rightarrow Y \rightarrow Z$  principle:

**X**: the position on an issue in the wider cultural world of Bible times

**Y**: the ethical assessment of the Bible on that issue for its time.

**Z**: the 'ultimate ethic' towards which Biblical statements are progressing.

He assumes that the Bible's final position has not necessarily reached the ultimate ethic, and that we must go further in line with the Bible's 'redemptive trajectory'.

Glen Scorgie uses the term, 'trajectory of the Spirit'.

This approach raises some important and unavoidable questions; BUT: if Scripture is not the revelation of the ultimate ethic, how can we possibly know what is?

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## PASTORAL APPLICATION

1 Tim 5:17.

2 Tim 2:15.

2 Tim 4:2-5.

Tit 1:9.

## REVELATION IN CREATION

### EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

#### Old Testament

##### **PSALM 19:1-4**

##### **1) The sky is a revelation from God (v 1)**

*Heavens* and *firmament* both refer to the visible skies (cf. Gen 15:5; Ex 32:13; Gen 1:6-8,14f,17,20).

The sky declares God's glory by showing his handiwork:

1. God's glory is evident in what he does. His skill is seen in the sky.
2. This is a revelation: God's works are exhibits which publish his splendour.

## 2) This is true all the time (v 2)

1. The daytime sky (brilliant sunshine or heavy cloud).
2. The night sky (magnificence of stars or eeriness of mist).
3. The transition from night to day (beauty of sunrise).
4. The transition from day to night (colours of sunset).

The sky can't help telling us of its maker's glory.

## 3) This is true everywhere (v 3-4a)

There is no place where the sky's voice is silent. It thunders. It sings.

All people are therefore inexcusable.

## New Testament

### ROMANS 1:19-20

#### 1) God is the author of the revelation in creation (v 19b)

In creating, God made shown himself.

#### 2) Not everything about God is knowable (v 19a)

Two things are universally clear known from creation (v 20):

1. His eternal power
2. His Godhead – his uniqueness, his all-sufficiency, his purity.

#### 3) This revelation in creation is seen in two places

1. In human life itself (v 19): the moral conscience.
2. In the world (v 20): the eyes see the things that are made, and the mind perceives that God made them.

#### 4) Unbelief is inexcusable (v 20)

The problem is not ignorance, but suppression, of the truth (v 18).

## FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE

### 1. The Early Christian Creeds

This aspect of the doctrine of revelation does not figure in the early creeds.

### 2. The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms

God revealed himself in his works of creation, preservation and control.

The universe is an 'elegant book', which may be compared to a play.

Creation and providence (which embraces both preservation and control) are a revelation of God: both the existence of the universe and the signs of God's ongoing involvement reveal his power, wisdom, and goodness.

Revelation in creation assumes prior faith.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

There has been some controversy over the validity of speaking of a revelation other than God's Word in Scripture and in Christ. Some people have taken exception to the reference in the Westminster Confession to the manifestation of God "by the light of nature".

**Robert Shaw** suggested four uses of the knowledge of God from the light of nature:

1. It is a testimony of the goodness of God towards all his creatures (Ac 14:17).
2. It restrains sinful man from excess of wickedness (Rom 2:14f).
3. It excites people to seek clearer revelation (Ac 17:27).
4. It vindicates the severity of God's judgment (Rom 1:20f; 2:15f).

The idea of "the light of nature" underlies various proofs for the existence of God which have been put forward.

**Thomas Aquinas** put forward 5 ways by which God's existence could be proved:

- 1) The argument from motion.
- 2) The argument from efficient cause.
- 3) The argument from possibility and necessity.
- 4) The argument from gradation in things.
- 5) The argument from the government of the world.

Aquinas taught that grace assists natural human knowledge.

The controversy over revelation in creation centres around the suspicion that such a revelation implies that human nature is not totally depraved. The view that grace merely assists conflicts with Jesus' teaching that a man must be born again before he can even see the kingdom of God.

**G.C. Berkouwer**, *General Revelation*, insists that this doctrine is not talking about abilities in human nature, but about where God has set his revelation. The fact that fallen man cannot see God's revelation in creation does not take away the fact that it is there.

**John Calvin**, *Institutes*, Book 1, chapters 3-5, teaches that the sense of deity is innate in man, though man has suppressed that knowledge. Revelation in creation has the effect of rendering man's unbelief inexcusable.

The current debate:

**Peter Cotterell**, *Mission and Meaninglessness* (1990), suggests that people who have never heard the gospel may be saved by Christ as they perceive God's revelation in creation.

**Hywel Jones**, *Only One Way* (1996), points out that Cotterell misuses Ac 17:27.

**Clark Pinnock**, *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (1992), regards general revelation as having enough light for some people to be saved by responding to it. Hywel Jones demonstrates Pinnock's faulty exegesis of Deut 4:19, 2 Kgs 5:18, Ac 14:16, and Rom 3:25, and concludes that the idea that revelation in creation is enough to lead people to salvation without ever hearing the gospel of Christ has no Biblical support.

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

Ac 14:15-17; 17:24-26: a point of contact for evangelism.

For the believer, whose eyes are opened, the response to God's revelation in creation must be admiring worship.

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# **THE DOCTRINE OF GOD**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The doctrine of God answers the question, 'what is God like?'

The doctrine of God is built largely from the OT: the NT assumes that God is as he has already revealed himself to be.

### **1) The LORD is unique and is therefore the universal King.**

- unique in comparison with other god (Ex 18:11).
- the only real God (1 Kgs 8:60; Jer 10:10; Deut 6:4).
- God everywhere (Josh 3:11; Ps 99:2; 2 Kgs 19:15).
- to be God is to be King (Pss 10:16; 115:3).

### **2) The LORD is righteous and is therefore the just Judge.**

- he is righteous (Ps 11:7; Ex 9:27; Ps 71:19; Deut 32:4).
- he is entitled to be Judge (Jer 51:56).
- his judgment is just (Ps 7:11).
- his righteous judgment is an expression of his jealousy (Deut 4:24).
- he takes vengeance on anything which assaults his honour (Nah 1:2).

### **3) The LORD is merciful and is therefore the compassionate Redeemer.**

- this is the heart of the Biblical doctrine of God.
- thirteen texts: Num 14:18; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:17,31; Pss 86:5,15; 100:5; 103:8; 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3.
- recurring truths: (1) the LORD's anger ignites slowly; (2) his kindness is totally unmerited; (3) he feels a yearning sympathy for people; (4) he longs for the opportunity to forgive; (5) he is good; (6) to seek mercy from the LORD is to find yourself on firm ground.

## **EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES**

### **Old Testament**

#### **EXODUS**

I AM (3:14) – God's pure reality.

The LORD (3:15) – the one who is.

The glory of the LORD is found in his goodness, which is gracious compassion, and it is conferred by the proclamation of the meaning of his name (33:19,22).

This proclamation takes place in 34:5-7. Here mercy is broken down into its component parts. Its crowning summit is the forgiveness of sin through the conclusion of punishment upon a substitute.

### **New Testament**

The songs in Lk 1 form a bridge from the OT to the NT. God's mercy is mentioned in verses 50, 54, 72, and 78. The Greek word means God's goodwill towards the miserable and his desire to help them (cf. Lk 6:36).

#### **2 CORINTHIANS 1:3**

Mercy is God's overarching quality.

## EPHESIANS 2:4

God overflows in mercy.

## ROMANS 9-15 (selections)

The fact of election (9:1-13) does not mean that God is unfair: the salvation of anyone at all is the fruit of his mercy (9:14-17).

God's ultimate purpose is that his mercy should be distributed everywhere (11:30-32). His grand aim is that all peoples should glorify him for his mercy (15:9), because mercy is, essentially, what God is.

## FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE

### 1. The Early Christian Creeds

The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed speak of God as:

(1) **Father** – emphasising his goodness, love, and mercy (cf. 2 Sam 7:14f; 1 Chr 7:13; Ps 89:24-28; 1 Chr 22:10; 28:6; Jer 31:9,20; Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16; 1 Chr 29:10; Mal 2:10; Jer 3:19; Isa 64:8; Isa 9:6; Mal 1:6; 2 Cor 1:3; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; 2 Jn 3; Jude 1-2; 1 Pet 1:3).

(2) **Almighty**: the Latin translation *omnipotens* is misleading; the original Greek term *pantokrator* means 'all-ruling': God is sovereign and gets his will done (cf. 2 Cor 6:18; Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 19:6,15; 21:22). In the LXX *pantokrator* usually translates 'LORD of hosts', a phrase which again stresses God's total government with a view to achieving his purpose, which is the dissemination of mercy.

(3) **Creator**: God is the originator of everything that exists outside of himself: there is a complete distinction between God and everything else, including the raw materials out of which everything was made; and because everything is God's, he fulfils his purpose, and gets his mercy glorified.

The Nicene Creed makes one additional statement: God is

(4) **One** – emphasising that he is the only God (cf. Ac 14:8-14; 17:16-31; 19:23-41; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Cor 12:2-3; 1 Cor 8:4-6; Ex 5:1-2). The truth that the LORD of mercy is the only God is stressed repeatedly in the OT (Deut 4:35,39; 32:39; 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:32; 1 Kgs 8:60; 2 Kgs 19:19; Isa 37:16,20; 43:10; 44:6,8; 45:5,6,14,18,21,22; 46:9; Joel 2:27; Deut 6:4).

### 2. The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms

#### 1) There is only one God.

- he is living and true.
- his life is in himself: he is not dependent on anything else.

#### 2) This one, living and true God is Spirit.

- he is invisible (Ex 33:20; Jn 1:18).
- he does not have a body.
- he is without passions: this truth was precious to the early fathers, but the idea has been much criticised in recent years. However, this is because of a misunderstanding of what the early fathers meant: not a God without feeling, but a God who is never at the mercy of circumstances outside himself.

#### 3) The only God, this living and true Spirit, is sovereign.

- he is absolute, free, immense, infinite, all-sufficient, great, blessed, immeasurable.
- this truth (1) deepens our veneration of God; (2) gives comfort in the midst of trials; (3) provides encouragement for evangelism.

- 4) **This sovereign God has all the equipment he needs for the exercise of his sovereignty**
  - he is wise, almighty, all-knowing, eternal, glorious, omnipresent.
- 5) **This sovereign God exercises his sovereignty for the purpose of showing mercy.**
  - the dark background against which God's mercy stands out: holiness, hatred of sin, justice, judgment, not clearing guilt.
  - eight aspects of mercy: immutability, love, grace, longsuffering, abundant goodness, abundant truth, forgiveness, rewarder.
- 6) **All this does not mean that we know everything about the true and living God.**
  - he is incomprehensible.
- 7) **The practical consequences of confessing faith in such a God.**
  - worship, service, obedience, confidence and hope.
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## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

**Desmond Maxwell** is concerned with the Hebrew roots of our faith. He notes that in the OT God reveals himself very much in terms of what he does.

- 1) The God of the Bible is at the centre of the world.
- 2) The God of the Bible is one whom we enjoy in relationship.
- 3) The God of the Bible is more geared to the verb than to the noun.
- 4) The God of the Bible is the God of covenant.

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

1. praise him for his mercy – Rom 15:9 (2 Sam 22:47-50).
2. proclaim that mercy to sinners – Ezek 18:32.
3. trust in him – Ps 36:7; Jer 14:22.

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# THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

## INTRODUCTION

The formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is an offshoot of the conviction of the first Christians that the man whom they had known as Jesus Christ was nothing less than divine: these Christological conclusions came first, and then had to be related back to the doctrine of the one God.

The God who is sovereign mercy exists in three 'Persons', and the sublime character of mercy is at the heart of all three.

The doctrine of God = the attributes, qualities, character of the one God.  
The doctrine of the Trinity = the threefold nature of that one God's being.

## EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

The raw materials for the doctrine of the Trinity are so obviously present in the Bible that no other conclusion is possible than that God is triune.

## New Testament

It was in the light of the manifestation of God the Son that the trinitarian nature of God became clear.

New Testament evidence for this doctrine:

Matt 28:19; Mk 1:9-11; Jn 14:16-26; 15:26; 16:5-15; Rom 8:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3-6; 2 Cor 13:14; Gal 4:4-6; Eph 1:3-14; 2:18; 4:4-6; 2 Thess 2:13f; Tit 3:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20f; Rev 1:5f.

Whether 1 Jn 5:7 should be included depends on text-critical conclusions.

### **MATTHEW 28:19**

- note the singular 'name'.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6**

- Spirit, Lord, and God equate to the Holy Spirit (v 3), Jesus (v 3), and the Father.
- The deity of Jesus is explicitly stated at Jn 20:28; Rom 9:5; Tit 2:13; Ac 20:28; 2 Pet 1:1; Heb 1:8; Jn 1:14,18; 1 Jn 5:20.

### **2 CORINTHIANS 13:14**

- an "embryonic Trinitarian formula".

## **Old Testament**

With the light of NT fullness shining on its revelation, we discover in the OT numerous clues to the Trinitarian nature of God.

Robert Reymond mentions the following clues:

- 1) The use of plural pronouns for God (Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:7).
- 2) Passages which distinguish God in one sense from God in another (eg. Pss 45:6f; 110:1).
- 3) Passages where 'the angel of the LORD' is both identified as God and yet distinguished from God (Gen 16:7-11,13; 48:15f).
- 4) Passages which depict the Word and the Spirit as co-workers with God (eg. Ps 33:6; Gen 1:2).
- 5) Passages which personalise God's Word or Spirit (eg. Ps 107:20; Isa 63:10).
- 6) Passages where the Messiah as a divine speaker refers to the LORD and/or the Spirit who sent him (eg. Zech 2:10f).
- 7) Texts where the prophet speaks of the LORD, his Angel and his Spirit as virtually distinct Persons (Isa 63:9f).
- 8) Passages where a plural noun is used to refer to God (eg. Ps 149:2).

Two more clues have also been suggested:

- 1) Louis Berkhof refers to the personification of divine wisdom in Prov 8:12-31.
- 2) Charles Hodge sees Trinitarian significance in the threefold form of the priestly blessing in Num 6:24-26.

## **FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE**

### **1. The Early Christian Creeds**

The fullest statement of the doctrine of the Trinity is found in the 'Athanasian Creed':

- 1) **There is only one undivided divine substance.**
- 2) **This divine substance is characterised by a number of attributes.**
  - seven are mentioned: eternity, glory, majesty, infinity, omnipotence, lordship, uncreatedness.

- 3) **Within this single divine substance there are three distinct Persons, who are not to be confused with one another.**
- 4) **All three Persons share all the divine attributes.**
- 5) **Each Person participates fully in divinity in his individual personhood.**
- 6) **There are certain individual properties which make the three Persons truly distinct from one another.**
  - the Father is not made, not created, and not begotten.
  - the Son not made, not created and not created, but is begotten.
  - The Holy Spirit is not made, not created, and not begotten, but proceeds.
- 7) **The three Persons are equal**
  - in time and in status.
- 8) **This triune God is to be worshipped.**
- 9) **To believe in God as he is (as Trinity) is vital for our eternal salvation.**

## 2. The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms

Since the doctrine of the Trinity had been settled by the early church and was not a matter of dispute in the Reformation, the Reformed Confessions either simply state that the one God exists in three Persons, or quote the wording of the ancient creeds.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

#### 1. The route to a full Trinitarian understanding.

As the first generations of Christians felt their way towards a true understanding of this doctrine several attempts to explain it were ruled out.

##### 1) *Economic Trinitarianism.*

- the view that the threefold personality in God is not intrinsic to his being, but was brought about for the purposes of creation, revelation, and redemption.

##### 2) *Monarchian Trinitarianism.*

- i. Adoptionism: God is essentially a unity; Jesus was a mere man until his baptism, when God adopted him as his Son.
- ii. Modalism: the one god, the Father, became the Son for the purpose of incarnation; God appears at different times in different modes (also known as patripassianism or Sabellianism).

##### 3) *Subordinationist Trinitarianism.*

- Origen: the fullness of Godhead was concentrated in the Father; the Son and the Spirit had a secondary deity.
- Arius: the Father alone is the eternal God; the Son is a creature, albeit one whose beginning was prior to the creation of the universe.
- in AD 325 the Council of Nicaea condemned Arianism. It upheld the view that the Son is *homoousios* (of the same essence) as the Father.

##### 4) *Homoiousian Trinitarianism.*

- throughout the fourth century debate raged about the appropriateness of the term *homoousios*.
- A compromise was suggested using the term *homoiousios* (of similar essence).
- Athanasius fought for the Nicene term, and his view prevailed.

From the late 4<sup>th</sup> century attention began to be paid to the Holy Spirit. He too was said to be *homoousios* with the Father and Son.

In AD 381 the Council of Constantinople ratified the formula of one God existing in three co-equal Persons of identical essence.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century Augustine made one further clarification: he shifted the starting point in talk about God from the Father to the divine nature itself.

## 2. Calvin's Trinitarian Theology

Robert Reymond argues that in the traditional definition of the doctrine of the Trinity there remains a danger of subordinationist interpretations.

Against this Calvin insisted that the Son is *autotheos* – God from himself, as opposed to the Nicene language, 'very God of very God'.

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

1. believe this doctrine – even where we cannot understand it.
2. seek to understand it more fully.
3. we need care in how we word our prayers.
4. rejoice in the Trinitarian framework of the gospel (Matt 28:18f; Jn 14:6; 2 Cor 13:14) – and proclaim the grace of such a God.

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# THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

## INTRODUCTION

How did the universe come into being? How do we account for the present state of things?

The OT term *bara*' is used of:

1. *the origin of the created order* (Gen 1:1,21,27; 2:3,4; 5:1,2; 6:7; Deut 4:32; Pss 89:12,47; 148:5; Eccl 12:1; Isa 40:26,28; 42:5; 45:12,18).
2. unprecedented events (Num 16:30; Ps 102:18; Isa 48:7; Jer 31:22).
3. the new creation in the human heart (Ps 51:10).
4. the life-supporting work of the Spirit in the material world (Ps 104:30).
5. the eschatological new creation in Christ (Isa 4:5; 41:20; 43:7; 45:8; 65:17-18).
6. the creation of Israel as God's redeemed people (Isa 43:1,15; Mal 2:10).
7. divine activities in the course of history (Isa 45:7; Amos 4:13).
8. human skill and activity (Isa 45:16; 57:19).
9. the origin of nations (Ezek 21:30; 28:13,15).

The NT *ktizo* word-group is used of:

1. *the initial origin of all things* (Mk 10:6; 13:19; Rom 1:20,25; 1 Cor 11:9; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16; 1 Tim 4:3; Heb 9:11; 1 Pet 4:19; 2 Pet 3:4; Rev 3:14; 4:11; 10:6).
2. *human beings* (Mk 16:15; Col 1:23).
3. *the universe as now existent* (Rom 8:19-22; Col 1:15).

4. *particular existent things* (Rom 8:39; 1 Tim 4:4; Heb 4:13; Rev 5:13; 8:9).
5. the new creation in Christ as presently experienced (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:10,15; 4:24; Col 3:10; Jas 1:18).

## **CREATION IN ITS ORIGIN**

### **EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES**

#### **Old Testament**

##### **GENESIS 1:1-2:3**

Creation is the stage on which the drama of God's mercy is acted out.

##### **Genesis 1:1**

1. *In the beginning.*
  - creation is the starting point of a definite period of time.
  - the end (Jude 21) is in view from the beginning.
2. *God.*
  - the title '*elohim*' stresses both God's sovereignty and saving mercy.
  - Gen 2:4 identifies the Creator with the LORD: the God who is known for his mercy is the Creator.
3. *created.*
  - creation was an act of effortless power.
  - the raw materials are themselves a part of God's creation.
4. *the heavens and the earth.*
  - this means everything.

Notice:

- 1) **The very first sentence of the Bible is a polemic against the polytheistic paganism by which Israel was surrounded.**
  - it refers to one '*elohim*' (cf. Jer 10:11).
  - it refers to creation in its totality.
- 2) **The precise status of the opening verse within the context that follows is a matter of discussion.**
  - is it a title or summary which is then expounded by the following verses?
  - is it the initial statement of the first act of creation?
  - can both views be accepted together?
- 3) **Already after just one sentence God's revelation is driving us to worship.**

##### **Genesis 1:2**

what is the meaning of *without form, and void*?

- it is sometimes taken to mean total chaos.
- a more positive explanation seems to be needed.
- initially God made creation unformed and unfilled.
- he went on to form it (days 1-3) and fill it (days 4-6).

**Genesis 1:3-25**

There are two corresponding sets of three days:

**DAY 1**

- light
- colour and beauty

**DAY 2**

- sky
- blue appearance

**DAY 3**

- land
- vegetation
- : herbs
- : fruit trees

**DAY 4**

- heavenly bodies
- structure of time

**DAY 5**

- marine life
- birds

**DAY 6**

- land animals
- : domestic
- : small animals
- : wild animals

Why was light created before the sun, moon and stars?

- the ultimate light source is God himself (cf. Rev 21:3; 22:5).
- the stars are not gods controlling human destiny.

Note six recurring features in this passage:

**1) God created by mere command** (vv 3,6f,9,11,14f,20f, 24).

**2) The entire universe was good.**

- in every individual part (vv 4,10,12,18,21,25)
- it glorified its maker.
- the earth was
- : productive (vv 11f,24).
- : reproductive (vv 11f,22).
- : rich in variety (vv 11f,24f).
- : abundant (v 20f).
- : regular and ordered (vv 16,18).

**3) God named the things he created** (vv 5,8,10).

**4) Creation took place by division** (vv 4,6,7,14,18).

- the integrity of different parts of creation was established at the first by the Creator.

**5) Living creatures were made ‘according to their kinds’** (vv 11f,21,24f).

- to confuse what God has distinguished is to replace God’s order by chaos.

**6) God’s creation is blessed by the Creator** (v 22).

**Genesis 1:31-2:3**

1) The integrated goodness of the completed whole (v 1:31).

2) The summary of the work done (2:1-2a).

3) The inauguration of the Sabbath (2:2b-3).

**New Testament****COLOSSIANS 1:15-16**

The NT adds one piece of information: the Christ was the Father’s agent in creation – see also Eph 3:9; Heb 1:2.

**1) He is the Son of his love.****2) He is the firstborn over all creation.**

- prior in time.
- supreme in rank.

**3) Note the three prepositional phrases.**

- I. All things were created *in him* (*en auto*).
  - the sphere in which creation took place.
- II. All things were created *through him* (*di' autou*).
  - the Mediator in creation as well as salvation.
- III. All things were created *towards him* (*eis auton*).
  - the goal towards which everything is moving.

**4) Note the two verb tenses.**

- I. '*Created in him*' is aorist.
  - this draws attention to the relationship between Christ and creation at its origin.
- II. '*Created through him and towards him*' is perfect.
  - this draws attention to the relationship between Christ and the continuing reality of the created universe.

**5) Consider the definition of 'all things'.**

- heavenly and earthly things.
- visible and invisible things.
- four specific categories in the angelic hierarchy.

**REVELATION 4:11**

God's ultimate purpose in creating was to bring pleasure to himself.

**FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE****1. The Early Christian Creeds**

Tertullian gives a thoroughly Christ-centred summary of the teaching of the creeds:

- 1) God created the world, which means all things.
- 2) God created by his Word.
- 3) The Word was sent forth before all things.
- 4) God created everything out of nothing.
- 5) The creative Word is the second Person of the Trinity.
- 6) The creative Word is also the revealing Word.
- 7) The creative, revealing Word is also the incarnate Word.

**2. The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms****1) God created everything.**

- including proportion and beauty.

**2) Creation was the beginning.****3) God created everything out of nothing.****4) Creation was the work of the triune God.**

- the Trinity operated through the instrumentality of his Word.
- the Word is identified with the second Person of the Trinity.

**5) God created everything in six days.**

- we therefore detect the orderliness of our world.

**6) God created everything very good.**

**7) God created everything for the benefit of man.**

- this applies equally to the invisible world.

**8) God created everything for himself.**

**9) False teaching about creation is rejected.**

- Marcionism taught that the God of the OT (just but not good) and the God of the NT (love in Jesus) were two different Gods; the imperfections in the material world prove that it is not the work of the loving God.
- Manichaeism taught an eternal conflict between God's kingdom of light and Satan's kingdom of darkness; however, the two kingdoms have become confused in the material world.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

A major issue raised by the doctrine of creation:

are the references to 6 days to be understood literally?

**John Morris** in *The Young Earth* argues against any attempt to harmonise Genesis with the evolutionary geological timescale.

He mentions four ways in which Christians have tried to make the two fit each other:

1. Theistic evolution.
  - i) deistic evolution.
  - ii) providential evolution.
2. The Gap theory.
3. The Day-Age theory.
4. The Framework hypothesis.

Morris offers the following reasons why all these approaches are ill-advised:

**1) Facts require interpretation.**

- the evolutionary timetable is not a fact but an interpretation based upon two assumptions: (1) the rate of change has always been uniform; (2) everything started from scratch.
- the 6-day creation interpretation has different assumptions: (1) the rate of change has been altered by catastrophe; (2) things did not start from scratch, because the creation began functionally mature.

**2) It is impossible to harmonise the Biblical and evolutionary accounts.**

- the order of appearance of things may be compared:

<u>Philosophy of evolution</u>		<u>The Bible</u>
Matter existed in the beginning.	1	In the beginning God created matter.
The sun and stars appeared first, then the earth.	2	The earth was made several days before the sun and stars.
The land appeared before the oceans.	3	The oceans were made before the land.
The sun was the first light source for our solar system.	4	Light was created before the sun.
The atmosphere was above one layer of water.	5	The atmosphere was between two layers of water.
The first forms of life were marine organisms.	6	The first life forms created were plants.
Fish evolved before fruit trees.	7	Fruit trees were created before fish.
Insects evolved before fish.	8	Fish were created before insects.
The sun predated the planets.	9	Vegetation was created before the sun.
Land animals appeared before sea mammals.	10	All types of sea creature predated land animals.
Reptiles came before birds.	11	Birds were created before any land animals.
Evolution proceeded by way of death.	12	Human sin caused the entry of death.

**3) The old-earth hypothesis threatens the gospel itself.**

- the introduction of death as a natural phenomenon undermines the entire structure of the Bible's story-line, for which death is the wages of sin.

**4) Apart from the fact that uniformitarianism is a presupposition, dating methods have in any case been shown up as unreliable.**

- circularity and guesswork is involved.

**5) Even if evolutionary presuppositions are accepted, some conclusions are incompatible with others.**

**6) Many of the implications of the old-earth theory are illogical.**

- where are the bones of all the people who have supposedly died?

**7) There is plenty of geological evidence for a young earth.**

- for example, there are upright fossilised tree trunks traversing numerous rock layers.

**8) Uniformitarian assumptions cannot be harmonised with Scripture because they cannot incorporate the teaching about the curse on creation.**

- there are two impossible options:
  1. to argue that there is no such thing as the curse, and that the world is still progressing towards perfection.
  2. To argue that creation was from the beginning subject to pain and death, and such things are included in God's description of the creation as 'very good'.

**9) The argument that 'day' can mean 'long period of time' in Genesis 1 is not borne out by Biblical usage.**

- 1. It is modified by a number.
- 2. It is used with the phrase 'evening and morning'.

- 3. Its use in the plural in the fourth commandment counts against it.

Did the early fathers teach that the days were creation eras?

When they did see the days as symbolic it was not to suggest that creation was billions of years old, but because they felt that God might have created everything instantaneously.

**Erich Sauer** in *The King of the Earth* notes that five different opinions have been held at different times by truly Bible-believing Christians:

1. The literal understanding of six 24 hour days.
2. The 'Period' theory.
3. The theory that the six days were days of revelation.
4. The 'Ideal' interpretation.
5. The Restitution theory.

It seems to me that none of the attempts to marry the claims of evolutionary theory with Scripture have as yet avoided falling foul of Rom 5:12 and 1 Cor 15:21.

Nevertheless, we do well to heed Erich Sauer:

"We must be careful and cautious in coming to a conclusion, and, above all, avoid self-confident dogmatism."

## **PASTORAL APPLICATION**

1. Creation is an object of joy – Ps 89:12.
2. Remember your Creator – Eccl 12:1.
3. Gordon Wenham makes three applications:
  - 1) God alone is to be worshipped.
  - 2) As creatures we must obey our Creator's directives.
  - 3) The revelation of God in creation leaves us without excuse for unbelief.
4. We should be concerned for the environment.

## **CREATION IN ITS PRESENT CONDITION**

### **EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES**

#### **Old Testament**

##### **GENESIS 3:17-19**

These verses describe present-day reality as regards the created world as cursed by thorns and thistles. Creation is spoiled, flimsy and dangerous.

Human life in the world is now an experience of constant frustration: toil and sweat are daily realities.

#### **New Testament**

##### **ROMANS 8:18-22**

###### **1) Creation's disappointment**

- *futility*: creation has lost its direction.
  1. It fails to function as it was designed to do.
  2. It is accorded a role for which it was never designed.
- three questions arise:
  - i. What is the force of *subjected*?
    - futility dominates everything.
  - ii. Who did the subjecting?

- man or God?
- iii. Whose unwillingness is meant?
  - God's or creation's?

- Four further terms depict creation's disappointment:
  - 1) *sufferings* – human suffering is a major symptom of the damage done to creation by sin.
  - 2) *bondage* – creation is off course, and is helpless to do anything about it.
  - 3) *corruption* – everything decays with use.
  - 4) *groaning* – a picture of the vast extent of the damage.

## 2) Creation's anticipation

- 1. Creation has an earnest expectation.
- 2. Creation waits eagerly.
- 3. Creation labours with birth pangs.

## FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE

All the early creeds and Reformation Confessions are silent on this theme.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

**Francis Schaeffer**, *Pollution and the Death of Man: the Christian view of ecology* (1970).

Schaeffer argues that it is a Christian responsibility to promote substantial healing in creation here and now in anticipation of the complete healing when Christ comes back. There is no justification for mere destructiveness.

**John A. Davies**, *Towards a Biblical Theology of the Environment* (1999).

Davies sees environmental concern as part of the duty to love one's neighbours, specifically those neighbours of the generations yet to be born.

Davies structures God's revelation in Scripture around three themes:

- 1) creation – the earth was not designed to exist independently of human care.
- 2) rebellion – the world as we presently experience it is an aberration, and human effort will never usher in an environmental utopia; however, we must expend effort to avoid making the abnormalities worse.
- 3) resurrection – the resurrection of Christ includes the promise of renewal for the entire creation.

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

**John Silvius** expresses the practical side of this doctrine in terms of *stewardship*, defined as the refusal to disregard the environment and earth's natural resources.

Silvius gives three marks of the Christian steward:

1. He loves the Creator.
2. He loves creation.
3. He understands his role – to manage the earth as the home of the whole human race.

Job 38:25-27: the world must be nurtured for God's sake.

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# THE DOCTRINE OF GOD'S DECREE

## INTRODUCTION

How much control does God still exercise in a world which has fallen from its original condition because of human sin?

God, on the basis of his unique, unrivalled, unchallengeable authority, has ordered what shall be.

Decrees: Ezra 5:13; 6:1,8,11; 7:13,21; Esth 1:19; 2:8; 3:15; 8:13; 9:14,32; Dan 2:9; 3:10,29; 4:6; 6:9,26; Jonah 3:7; Lk 2:1.

Eight different words are translated 'decree':

- 1) *t'm* – a monarch passes whatever laws happen to be to his taste.
- 2) *dt* – what becomes law depends on the whim of the monarch.
- 3) *dbr* – a decree originates in what the monarch says.
- 4) *ptgm* – a decree has the force of a command.
- 5) *m'mr* – what the monarch says goes.
- 6) *'sr* – a decree is a legally binding obligation.
- 7) *chqq* – a monarch's decree is permanent.
- 8) *dogma* – whatever seemed right to the monarch acquired the force of law.

Three of them (numbers 1, 5, and 6) are never used of God's decree: God never acts on a whim.

The other five throw light on the nature of God's decree:

- *dt* (De 33:2; Ezra 7:12,14,15,16; Dan 6:5) – the LORD's law is neither malicious nor whimsical; his decree is unalterable.
- *dbr* – the LORD's unwritten decree is as inerrant as his spoken word.
- *ptgm* (Ecc 8:11) – the LORD passes edicts which stand.
- *chqq* (Pss 60:7; 108:8; Isa 33:22; Prov 8:27,29; Isa 49:16) – the LORD's decree is as permanent as an engraving.
- *dogma* (Eph 2:15; Col 2:14) – God's decree includes the declaration of punishment against sin.

Statement of the doctrine of God's Decree:

God has made decisions governing the material universe and political culture; his will (although at times mysterious) is the ultimate governing factor in absolutely everything.

Two other words are also translated 'decree' with reference to God:

- *chq* (Pss 2:7; 148:6; Jer 5:22) – a decision made in eternity past which determines what happens for the whole of the history of creation.
- *gzrh* (Dan 4:17,24) – the LORD has disallowed certain possibilities: he is the Most High, the uppermost authority.

## EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

### Old Testament

#### **GENESIS 50:20**

Whatever happens, behind it there is a divine plan which is always intended to promote ultimately what is good.

#### **JOB 42:2**

God's purpose and the outworking of things are tied together.

The LORD's purpose was planned with wisdom: he skilfully avoids anything which, in the long term, would be detrimental to the good.

**PSALM 33:11**

The LORD has, with deliberate, careful planning, determined everything that will happen.

The plan was prepared in advance of the commencement of the work.

God's plan is like an arch spanning the history of creation.

**PSALM 115:3**

The grand end of everything is God's own joy.

His absolute sovereignty enables him to achieve those things which delight his heart.

**PSALM 135:6**

There is nowhere outside the LORD's control.

**ISAIAH 14:24-27**

The LORD's purpose is deliberately determined: whatever option he has settled on gets fulfilled and no human power can prevent it.

**ISAIAH 46:9-11**

Four phrases refer to the divine decree:

- *My counsel* = the LORD decreed with deliberate purpose.
- *My pleasure* = he decrees what brings him delight.
- *I have spoken* – God gets his will done with ease; as at creation, he speaks and it is done.
- *I have purposed* – the LORD moulds things like a potter.

Each phrase is linked with a statement affirming that God's decree is accomplished in fact.

Notice also:

- 1) God declares the end from the beginning.
- 2) Only such a God is worthy of the title 'God'.

**New Testament****I. GENERAL STATEMENTS OF GOD'S DECREE****ACTS 15:18**

God does not react to situations as they arise. He knew from eternity everything he would ever do.

**ROMANS 11:36**

Three prepositions together state God' responsibility for absolutely everything:

- *of him* – all events originate from God.
- *through him* – all events take place through God's direct involvement.
- *to him* – all things are moving towards God's glory.

**EPHESIANS 1:11**

Notice the three key terms:

- *God works* – he is the energising dynamism behind all that happens.
- *counsel* – all things are planned by his 'decisive resolve'.
- *will* – his decision is made with delight.

**HEBREWS 6:17**

Once God had decided the course of events in his creation, nothing could alter any single element in his plan.

**II. SPECIFIC STATEMENTS OF THE DECREE RELATING TO THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST****LUKE 22:22**

God had fixed in advance the length of Jesus' earthly life.

**ACTS 2:23**

God appointed that the death of Christ must happen.

**ACTS 4:28**

God was in intimate control of all the events surrounding the crucifixion.

The decree centres upon God's saving mercy.

**FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE**

The early creeds did not spell this out.

**The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms**

- 1) **God foreordained whatever comes to pass in time.**
- 2) **God's decree effectually works and disposes all things.**
- 3) **God's decree was made in eternity.**
- 4) **God's foreordination of all things was a totally free decision.**
- 5) **God's decree is unalterable.**
- 6) **The ultimate goal of God's decree is the glory of his name.**
- 7) **We are not always able to unravel the mysteries of God's plan.**
- 8) **It is necessary to make three qualifications to the doctrine of God's decree:**
  1. God is not the author of sin.
  2. The freedom of intelligent creatures is not violated.
  3. The fact of 'second causes' is not denied.
- 9) **God's decree is in Christ.**

**HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

The **Openness of God** debate (Open Theism):

**Clark Pinnock:**

Starting point: God is dynamically relational, personal, and interactive. There are some aspects of the future which God has chosen not to predetermine. He can therefore be surprised by what his creatures do.

**1) God's sovereignty is general, not all-encompassing.**

- God's goals will certainly be achieved.
- he leaves the route to their achievement flexible.

**2) This is because God voluntarily limits himself.**

- God could determine everything.
- for the sake of love he chooses not to do so, but to give his creatures genuine freedom.

**3) The history of the world is therefore an indefinite story.**

- the history of creation is the story of partnership between God and man.
- God is the senior partner, but we make real decisions.

**4) In such a history God takes risks and makes himself vulnerable.**

- history is a real story, full of tensions and surprises.
- God takes risks, so that his creatures can respond to him freely with true love.

**5) God himself is not at risk, and neither is his purposed end.**

- some aspects of history are definite because God has planned them.
- he will bring about his goal as planned.

**6) God's omniscience is current and present.**

- God cannot know everything fully and exhaustively.
- he knows all that is there to be known at any given time.
- the future is not yet there to be known, and God's omniscience is not in the realm of logical impossibility.

**7) God has the wisdom to handle every situation that arises.**

- this is the foundation of Christian assurance.
- God knows everything that could happen and how to respond if it does.

**8) Certain Scriptures show that God does not have complete knowledge of the future.**

- Gen 22:12; Deut 13:3; Jonah 3:10; Jer 26:3; 32:25; Ezek 12:3.

**9) The openness of God has far-reaching pastoral implications.**

- we may live passionately for God because our lives and our prayers make a real difference.

**John Sanders**

Starting point: (1) there are many tragedies in human experience; (2) Christian piety clashes with the doctrine of God's decree.

**1) God is love and has almighty power.****2) In his freedom God decided to create man to collaborate freely with him towards the achievement of his goals.**

- he therefore leaves some of his actions contingent upon our decisions.

### 3) In his wisdom God exercises general control, not meticulous control of every detail.

- God allows space for us to work.
- he is creative and resourceful in working with us.
- his strategies are flexible.
- his eternal purpose relates to the destination, not the route.

### 4) God is omniscient.

- he knows all that it is logically possible to know.
- he knows the past and present with definite knowledge.
- he knows the future as partly definite (closed) – Jer 5:15-18 – and partly indefinite (open) – Ex 4:8f; Jer 26:3; Ezek 12:3.
- two sets of Scriptures must be held together; one set must not be subordinated to the other.

Implications: God is opposed to sin, but may be grieved.

Chris Hall challenges Open Theism with this question: doesn't it leave God "just fumbling along with the rest of us?"

Sanders denies this: openness theology does not teach that just anything might happen, because God is acting to achieve his purpose, albeit through genuine collaboration.

What sets the LORD apart from false gods is not that he knows the future, but that he can declare what will happen and bring it about (Isa 41:21-24; 46:9f; 48:3-5).

### RESPONSE to Open Theism

#### 1) Recognise that there is a real challenge here which cannot be casually cast aside.

#### 2) The strengths of Open Theism.

1. It takes the Bible seriously.
2. It is pursuing an intellectually satisfying faith.
3. It takes seriously the human consciousness of freedom.
4. It avoids reducing the doctrine of the decree to the banal.

#### 3) Questions which must be raised against Open Theism:

- Robert Reymond asks three questions:
  1. If the ultimate destination is fixed, is there really true freedom?
  2. Could an open God hold false views about the future?
  3. What is the point of praying about the actions of free agents whom God is not controlling?
- Another five questions might be posed:
  1. Why is it assumed that a God of love who is relational, personal, and interactive must be incompatible with a God who has decreed whatever happens?
  2. Is it in fact logically impossible for God to know in advance what free agents will freely choose to do (see Prov 22:3; 27:12)?
  3. If God knows everything that could happen, then he must contain within himself a blueprint for all possible worlds: why is it beyond him to predict which of them would turn out to be the real world?
  4. Is Open Theism really an answer to tragedy?

5. If God has freely chosen not to know everything, will he not know what he has freely chosen not to know?

#### 4) Two statements relevant to Open Theism:

- 1. it is necessary to distinguish 'will' from 'want'.
- 2. Since our prayers and choices are ordained as means to God's purposed ends, Christian piety is not in fact contradicted by Reformed theology.

#### 5) Scriptural assessment.

- an examination of the ten texts cited:
- GENESIS 22:12
  - does the word *now* imply that God did not know before?
    - the etymology of the word suggests that what was a supra-temporal knowledge has now been anchored in time.
- EXODUS 4:8f
  - do the words *if* and *may* indicate that God does not know what the outcome will be?
    - God is actually quoting Moses back at him (cf. v 1): the uncertainty is with Moses.
- DEUTERONOMY 13:3
  - does the LORD need to set a test in order to *know*?
    - Augustine suggests that it is the people who need to know; Calvin thinks that the point is that God will know from experience as well as in his hidden wisdom.
- ISAIAH 41:21-24; 46:9f; 48:3-5
  - Sanders' argument that the issue is not foreknowledge but power is unconvincing; all three passages emphasise prediction of the future.
- JEREMIAH 26:3 and EZEKIEL 12:3
  - do the words *perhaps* and *it may be* indicate God's uncertainty?
    - it is better to read them as stressing the genuineness of God's appeal, even though he knew what the outcome would be.
- JEREMIAH 32:25
  - according to Pinnock the fact that God commanded Jeremiah to do something which subsequently proved unwise shows that he did not know what was going to happen.
    - this is to ignore the context: the rest of the chapter promises the return of God's people to their land; his instruction is a call for faith
- JONAH 3:10
  - does *God relented* imply a change of mind on the basis of an unforeseen result?
    - all God's warnings are conditional, and are part of his strategy to evoke the repentance which he has determined to see.

#### 6) Conclusion.

- Open Theism has something to teach us: God is not unresponsive.
- however, the idea that he is ignorant of future human decisions is hard to sustain from Scripture.
- the following texts seem to proclaim God's absolute and detailed knowledge of the future: 1 Sam 8:9; Ps 139:2 (cf. 2 Kgs 19:25; Isa 22:11; 25:1; 37:26; Jer 31:3); Ps 139:16; Jer 1:5.

### PASTORAL APPLICATION

We may be supremely confident: Rom 8:35-39.

We must be completely humble: we are responsible, but not autonomous.

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## THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

### INTRODUCTION

How does God's overall control, God's eternal decree, work out in practice in the course of time?

God, in foreknowledge, has taken forethought with a view to the wise ordering of the world.

Theologians distinguish God's special providence (his care for his own people) and his general providence (ordering of life in general). Our concern is with the latter.

Three strands in God's general providence:

- 1) Preservation (Neh 9:6; 2 Pet 3:7; Ps 36:6; Gen 45:5-7).
- 2) Provision (Ps 65:9; Job 38:41; Philip 4:19).
- 3) Direction (Isa 28:24-29; cf. Pss 93:1-4; 47:2-8; 74:12).

### EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

#### Old Testament

##### **GENESIS 8:22**

- a summary doctrine of providence.
- God's assurance that the seasonal rhythms on which life depends will be maintained.

##### **JOB 38-41**

Even a world of baffling paradox is under God's providential control.

First speech: God's management of the universe (38:2-39:30)

- 38:4-15: God as Creator
- 38:16-39:30: God as Ruler
  1. Of inanimate nature (38:16-38)
    - i. The depths and expanses (16-18)
    - ii. Light and darkness (19-21)
    - iii. The weather (22-30)
    - iv. The stars (31-33)
    - v. Floods (34-38)
  2. Of animate nature (38:39-39:30)
    - i. Nourishment (38:39-41)
    - ii. Procreation (39:1-4)
    - iii. Wild freedom (5-8)
    - iv. Intractable strength (9-12)
    - v. Incongruous speed (13-18)
    - vi. Fearsome strength (19-25)
    - vii. The flight of the predator (26-30)

Second speech: God as the Lord of history (40:7-41:34)

- the two monsters symbolise superhuman forces of moral evil.
- even these are not independent of God's providential control.

**PSALM 104**

- Theme: “God’s greatness in ruling and sustaining his creation”.
- 1) His control of the waters (vv 6-18,25f).
- 2) His provision for living creatures (vv 11f,14-18, 27f).
- 3) His regulation of time (vv 19-23).
- 4) His distribution of life and death (v 29f).

**New Testament****MATTHEW 5:45**

- God’s good gifts are showered equally on believers and unbelievers alike.
- This is Jesus’ answer to the ‘prosperity gospel’.

**MATTHEW 6:26-33; 10:29-31**

- God feeds the birds and decorates the flowers: his providence extends to the minutest details of the circumstances of his most trivial creatures.
- He will therefore look after the most valuable of his creatures – people.
- In v 29 the word ‘will’ is not actually present in the Greek original: it is not just the Father’s will, but his action.

**ACTS 17:25f**

- 1) God is independent of his creation.
- 2) God is the supreme giver.
- 3) God is the author of ethnicity.
- 4) God has determined national duration.
- 5) God has determined national location.

**COLOSSIANS 1:17**

The point of cohesion by which all things are preserved is found in Christ.

**HEBREWS 1:3**

Christ upholds (carries) everything:

- he prevents it falling to destruction.
- he moves it forwards towards its destiny.

“Resist the temptation to think about providence generally and independently of Christ” (T.H.L. Parker).

**FORMULATION OF DOCTRINE**

The early creeds are silent about providence.

**The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms****1) The Meaning of Providence.**

- preservation: sustaining and provision.
- government: natural and moral

**2) The Scope of Providence.**

- universal, on two levels:
- cosmic direction.
- government of details.

**3) The Character of God's Providence.**

- 1. Morally: just, right, good, holy.
- 2. Practically: wise, inscrutable.

**4) The Basis of God's Providence.**

- 1. God's infallible foreknowledge.
- 2. The free counsel of God's will.

**5) The Methods of Providence.**

- ordinary providence: God uses means.
- miraculous providence: God works without means.

**6) Providence and Sin.**

- we are here in the realm of mystery.
- sin is not outside God's providential control.
- God is not the author of sin.

**7) The Purposes of Providence.**

- 1) so that creation serves mankind so that man can better serve God.
- 2) so that God's people are taken care of.
- 3) so that God is glorified.

**8) The Benefits of Providence**

- comfort and patience.

**9) Providence Contrasted with Mistaken Views.**

- 1) Creation is not abandoned to fortune or chance.
- 2) Providence is not restricted to the heavens, leaving the earth ungoverned.
- 3) Creation is not governed by inbuilt laws, independent of God's continued influence (Fatalism).
- 4) God's providence does not make human effort vain.
- 5) The Epicurean rejection of providence which proclaims human self-salvation is to be rejected.

**HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Irenaeus** (a second-century French theologian) refers to providence in four passages of *Against All Heresies*.

**1) Book 2. Chapter 26. Paragraph 3.**

- in God's providence there is a purpose to everything:
  - negatively:
    - nothing happens in vain.
    - nothing happens accidentally.
  - positively
    - everything happens with exceeding suitability.
    - every event happens in elevated harmony.

2) *Book 3. Chapter 25. Paragraph 1.*

- 1) The title used for God: Ruler.
- 2) The description of God's providential activity: governing.
- 3) The explanation of universal providence as the arranging of the affairs of our world.
- 4) The universality of providence.
- 5) Providence should bring people to a knowledge of God.

3) *Book 4. Chapter 22. Paragraph 2.*

- 1) The coming of Christ was the supreme act of providence.
- 2) The providence of God in the coming of Christ was directed towards believers.

4) *Book 4. Chapter 36. Paragraph 6.*

- 1) God exercises providence by issuing the benevolent word of command.
- 2) God's administration of the world secures its harmonious continuation.

**John Flavel** (a seventeenth-century English puritan) wrote *The Mystery of Providence* in 1678.

Theme: in times of distress we cope by meditating on providence.

Proofs of overruling providence:

- 1) mercies which go beyond the ability of natural causes.
- 2) strange coincidences of natural causes.
- 3) the ineffectiveness of all attempts to destroy the people of God.
- 4) the way sinners are turned out of the way of evil.
- 5) the repayment of evils done to God's people.
- 6) the way the Scriptures describe exactly the experiences which God's people enjoy.
- 7) the way things fall out so remarkably in the nick of time.
- 8) answers to prayer.

Areas of life where the believer may observe providence:

- 1) birth and upbringing.
- 2) the work of conversion.
- 3) our employment.
- 4) our family situation.
- 5) the way we are preserved from evil.
- 6) the work of sanctification.

Things to set before yourself in times of distress:

- 1) the sovereignty of God.
- 2) the grace and goodness of God.
- 3) the wisdom of God.
- 4) the faithfulness of the Lord.
- 5) the all-sufficiency of God.
- 6) the immutability of God.

## **PASTORAL APPLICATION**

- 1) Get a hold on the assurance that God is in control.
- 2) Rejoice in the obvious instances of God's providential furtherance of his own work.
- 3) Find in God's indiscriminate benevolence matter for fervent praise.
- 4) Preach providence – evangelistically and to the saints.
- 5) Find comfort in the thought that God's providence is especially tender towards his own children.
- 6) Thrill to the truth that God's providential rule centres in Christ.